



When Felixstowe lost its Coastguard service over 20 years ago local volunteers rallied to the cause

WORDS: Mike Trippitt ♦ PHOTOS: Sarah Lucy Brown

The orange lifeboat adds a splash of colour to the grey and brown hues of the damp morning.

Slowly, almost silently at first, it noses out from Levington Marina into the River Orwell's flood tide, and pushes through the waves borne of a bitterly cold, southwesterly gale.

Volunteer is Felixstowe Volunteer Coastal Patrol Rescue Service's rigid-hulled inflatable boat. At the helm is chairman, and first coxswain John Cresswell. He says Volunteer is exceptional.

"She has been worked very hard, having attended 1,232

incidents, and has travelled the equivalent of four times around the globe. And she has never let us down."

A former HM Coastguard Auxiliary, Cresswell, now 72, is a Suffolk man to the core. His entire working life and most of his retirement has been spent in, on or under the waves. The salty waters of the North Sea course his veins.

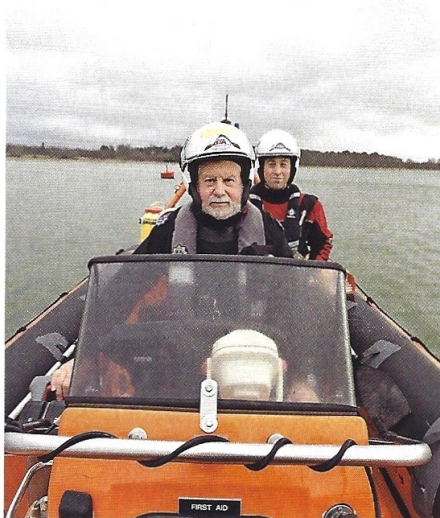
"My background led me to join HM Coastguard as a volunteer in 1992. Back then there was a coastguard base in Felixstowe and a Coastguard Patrol Boat stationed here," he says. But an unexpected event took him

in a new direction. "When HM Coastguard withdrew that boat from service without warning in the autumn of 1996 I, like many others, was concerned about the safety of sailors and others using the sea and coastline. I feared that the absence of the boat would put lives at risk."

At the end of a meeting about the loss of the Coastguard service he made an impromptu, and arguably rash statement. "If the Coastguard won't do it, we'll set up a patrol service ourselves." John says it now seems a long time ago. "When I made my famous quote on the town hall steps that we were going to start

ABOVE: John Cresswell, chairman and first coxswain of Felixstowe Volunteer Coast Patrol Rescue Service

RIGHT: John Cresswell and Chris Ralph



our own service I hadn't got any volunteers."

But a fortnight later Landguard Rotary Club made a donation of £200. "They said they liked someone with a dream. It was like the Queen's shilling. I couldn't go back could I? That's really where it started."

With support from Suffolk Coastal District Council and Felixstowe Town Council, and the commitment of a band of volunteers, Felixstowe Volunteer Coastal Patrol Rescue Service (FVCPRS) was born, making its first patrol on August 17 1997.

John steers 'Volunteer' up river towards The Orwell Bridge stopping briefly at Pin Mill to let crew volunteer Chris Ralph take the helm. They are using this time afloat as training for Chris and to carry out a routine visual inspection of the bridge.

Chris, an Associate Ambulance

Technician with the East of England Ambulance Service, is in his second season with the service. Although Chris had no previous experience of the sea or boats, John says he is an asset to the service in his own right due to his paramedic skills.

Not only does FVCPRS, a registered charity, patrol the shoreline around Felixstowe looking for people in danger, it is an additional rescue facility for HM Coastguard, a volunteer water-borne resource for Suffolk Constabulary, and it carries out monitoring and enforcement of bylaws and speed limits on behalf of Suffolk Coastal District Council, Felixstowe Town Council and Ipswich port. The often dangerous and challenging tasks range from rescues to boat recovery, and from flood assistance to immigration. Highly-trained volunteers

carry out eight-hour patrols at weekends from Easter to October.

John Cresswell holds the service's 24 unpaid volunteers, from all walks of life, in the highest regard. "They are all individualists. All have their own ideas and plans, but they come together and work as a team."

An endless round of fundraising and appeals keeps the service going. Not a penny goes on niceties. Volunteers buy their own kit, the committee pays for stamps and phone calls, and someone else pays the road tax.

After John and Chris carry out a visual inspection for anyone loitering around the piers of the Orwell Bridge, Chris turns 'Volunteer' round to head down river. The teeth of a cold wind bite the skin and salty, ice-cold spray dowses the vessel.

As another busy season beckons, John reflects on the ups and downs of the past 21 years. The low point came on December 5 2013. While on its way by road to respond to an east



ABOVE: The FVCPRS launch, Volunteer, covers 4,000 nautical miles a year

coast flood emergency, Volunteer, its trailer and support vehicle were involved in a serious road accident. A gust of high wind turned over the boat and the vehicle. John and two others were injured.

"It was immediately obvious that the boat had suffered significant damage. As I was lying on my side in the vehicle how could I not think the boat was going to be written off?

"The enormity of what happened was instant. I thought we were lucky to have survived." John and his colleagues were taken to Accident and Emergency at Ipswich where the mood was "grim but really positive".

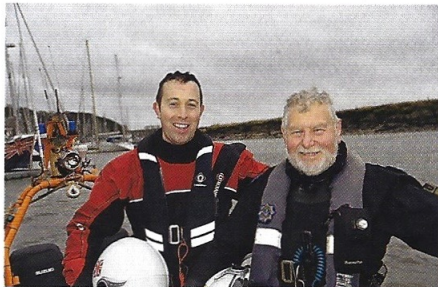
"I was a lot happier when I

knew that the other two who had been in the vehicle were alright. But then it hit me that the service was finished." But within days plans were afoot to move on, to rise from the ashes and to get FVCPRS up and running again. By the following spring, Volunteer was, against the odds, afloat again.

"Without a doubt," says John. "The one single factor that turned the low point of the accident into being back on the water two to three months later was the effort and commitment of the volunteers." There have, of course, also been many high points. "I do have satisfaction knowing that the job has been done right," he says in his rich Suffolk accent. "When I look back and see how many lives we've actually saved and the effort that has gone in, and the way we have changed other people's lives, that is the high point of what we do."

It will again be difficult to raise the £25,000 a year to run the service. Public donations, no matter how small, are a vital source of income and without a major sponsor there is no spare cash. But John Cresswell says FVCPRS will never charge for a rescue.

"The day that happens, there is no place for me." He remains as committed to the service's ethos as he was when it all began. In Salutem Omnium – For The Safety Of All. ♦



John Cresswell and Chris Ralph

STAYING AFLOAT

FVCPRS takes delivery of a new lifeboat this summer, Last Orders, partly funded by a donation from retired publicans Len and Jo Wenham, from Levington. Eight metres long and wider than the existing boat, it is substantially bigger and provides better rescue capability, with two 115hp Suzuki outboard engines and a top speed of around 45 knots.

FVCPRS covers 4,000 nautical miles each season and is always

looking for new crew volunteers. Experience of boats is not necessary but compassion and a sense of humour are. Anyone interested can contact John Cresswell at fvcprs@gmail.com or phone 07748 526322. More information online at guardian-rescue.com

FVCPRS has always operated without a major sponsor. John would like to talk to businesses who might be interested in a partnership opportunity.